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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

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Subject: "GLORIFYING THE GRIDDLE CAKE." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

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Maybe you grew up as I did believing that pancakes were an American creation -- born and bred in these United States. I've had that notion in my head for many years. So you can imagine my surprise when a friend, just back from traveling around the world, began to tell me about the "old-time" potato pancakes she had in Germany, and the jam-spread pancakes she had in Sweden from a recipe many generations old, and the pancakes served with cinnamon and ginger in India, and finally the rice pancakes of Japan. What is more, she assured me that these pancake ideas were not borrowed from America but belonged to their own country -- were folk dishes, you might say.

So I learned for the first time that pancakes were truly international. And I believe I know why so many countries discovered them. I think it's because this combination of a batter and a hot griddle is such a simple and easy one, yet one that produces such nourishing and delicious results. Maybe economy has had something to do with it, too. Most pancakes are made of inexpensive ingredients and need very little time and fuel and only the simplest equipment.

Here in America we have our own pancake customs. We even have special names for our own pet versions -- call them griddle cakes or hot cakes or flapjacks. True old-fashioned American varieties are made of wheat or corn or buckwheat flour. And the true American accompaniment is maple sirup up North and cane sirup down South. Our custom is to eat pancakes for breakfast, but in other countries people serve them either for dessert or with meat as the main dish of luncheon.

Well, one of the reasons for the early popularity of the pancake in this country was that it was a breakfast dish that "stuck to the ribs." Farmers and lumberjacks and gold miners and cowboys and anyone else doing heavy work liked a flapjack breakfast because it would stand by until the noon meal.

But even the heartiest lumberjack wouldn't have cared much for some of the pancake specimens I've had the misfortune of meeting. I'm thinking now of the cake that comes off the griddle as tough and durable as a doormat, and also of the limp gluey cake with the greasy look. Both the doctor and the epicure would say thumbs down on such pancakes.

But the pancake that has taken its place in the hearts of its countryman is golden brown, tender, and well-done with a crisp surface. This kind of cake is baked not fried. Of course, your griddle needs slight greasing to keep the cake from burning, but a "shine" is all the fat it needs. The backwoodsmen early discovered how good a bacon rind is for this shining job. But any other good fat will do, of course. Have your griddle hot but not too hot -- just under the smoking point of the fat. On this hot griddle pour your batter over

a space about the size of a small saucer. Then stand, with your pancake-turner in hand, until the bubbles rising in the batter have pitted the top surface with tiny holes. You never need to peek underneath to see if the cake is ready to turn. Just watch until these bubbles have spread all over the cake and then flip it over.

Many good cooks hold that the tenderest and most delicious pancakes are made with a sour-milk-and-soda batter. Others hold that a sweet-milk mixture is just as good. You can make good pancakes either way. The point is to have a dependable recipe. Here are the proportions for the true old-time wheat-flour flapjack made with sweet milk: 1 and 1/2 cups of sifted soft-wheat flour; 2 teaspoons of baking powder; 1/2 teaspoon of salt; 1 tablespoon of sugar; 1 cup of milk; 1 egg; and 1 to 2 tablespoons of butter or other melted fat. Mixing these ingredients is easy. Sift the dry ingredients together first. Then add the beaten egg and milk together. And finally stir in the melted fat. That's the famous American flapjack. The corn cake is the favorite pancake of the South. This is a simple mixture, too, and generally made with sour milk and soda. Mix 2 cups of white corn meal with 1/2 cup of flour; 1/2 teaspoon of salt; and 3/4 teaspoon of soda. Add two cups of sour milk and two beaten eggs. Then add 1 tablespoon of melted butter. This batter improves on standing in the refrigerator a few hours.

Of all the typical American pancakes, the buckwheat cake is the only one made with yeast. It's an overnight cake. The batter has to rise during the night. But it's easy to make just the same.

Well, so much for the plain everyday American griddle cake -- humble and hearty breakfast fare. Now about a few of the dressier members of the pancake family that originated on the Continent. As you might guess, the fanciest of all the family are the French pancakes which they call "crepes" (pronounced krape). These are sweet desserts. Most of them are spread with a rich, sweet filling, then rolled, and sprinkled with powdered sugar. The famous crepe Suzette is made with a sweet orange filling, covered with cognac and usually served lighted like a plum pudding. Of all the pancakes this is the one that has reached the dizziest social heights. King Edward VII took a fancy to this dessert back in his gay young days in Paris. The story goes that he named it for a young actress named Suzette, then starring in the Comedie Francaise, who served pancakes in one act. The glass of liquor was poured over the pancakes and lighted so the audience could see the food.

Well, that's a brief sketch of the international pancake from the humble breakfast flapjack of the lumber camp to the crepe Suzette of the tables of royalty. Plain or fancy, it's good food when properly made. Just remember that the trick in baking is to have your griddle shiny but not greasy, and hot but below the smoking point. And remember to turn the cake over only when the surface is covered with bubbles. With the pancake you can serve a variety of foods--all the way from butter and maple sirup or melted jelly to a meat mixture or a fancy filling of orange, butter and sugar.

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